

BUILDING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE: A FOCUS ON SUCCESSION PLANNING  
WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

**BUILDING A LEADERSHIP PIPELINE: A FOCUS ON SUCCESS PLANNING WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, William E. Meadows, 82 pages.**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) is an agency entrusted with one of the most sacred missions of any governmental agency. The DVA serves our nations through the three administrations: the Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Cemetery Administration, and the Veterans Health Administration. Over the past decade, the DVA has found it necessary to transform in order to meet the needs of the Veterans we serve. The department faces significant challenges due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an aging Vietnam Veteran population afflicted with presumptive conditions related to Agent Orange exposure, as well as the loss of significant numbers of World War II Veterans due to age. In 2010, the DVA began a transformation process; however, the department continues to face significant challenges which will persist into the immediate future. In order to meet these challenges, the DVA will need strong executives capable of meeting the challenges, which lay ahead. However, data demonstrates that the department could face significant turnover within the department's Senior Executive Service (SES) ranks that could significantly affect agency operations. This research project focuses on determining what leadership development opportunities the DVA should provide to individuals in order to prepare them for the SES, thus ensuring effective succession planning within the department. The study considers succession planning from a holistic approach, and asserts that the process should begin once an individual assumes a leadership role within the department.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ACRONYMS.....	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Department of Veteran Affairs Overview .....	1
Analysis of Current and Future Organizational Challenges within the DVA .....	5
Significance .....	8
Primary Objective .....	10
Primary Research Question .....	10
Secondary Research Questions.....	10
Assumptions.....	11
Definitions .....	11
Limitations .....	13
Delimitations.....	13
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....	14
History of the Civil Service and Merit System.....	14
MSP .....	16
PPP .....	17
Birth of the SES .....	18
ECQ .....	20
Succession Planning .....	21
DVA Senior Executive Service .....	25
Application of Strategic Planning.....	26
Considerations when Conducting Strategic Planning.....	27
Corporate Considerations .....	28
Leadership Development .....	30
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY .....	38
CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS .....	44
Importance of Basic Competencies .....	45

Key Findings .....	45
Strategic Approach .....	46
Senior Leadership Involvement .....	48
Identification and Selection .....	49
The Right Opportunities .....	51
Be Proactive .....	52
Importance of Lifelong Learning.....	55
Conclusion .....	56
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	58
Recommendations for Future Research .....	67
REFERENCE LIST .....	69

## ACRONYMS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DVA	Department of Veteran Affairs
ECQ	Executive Core Qualifications
FY	Fiscal Year
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GS	General Schedule
MBA	Masters of Business Administration
MSP	Merit System Principle
MSPB	Merit System Protection Board
NCA	National Cemetery Administration
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
P&G	Proctor & Gamble
PPP	Prohibited Personnel Practice
SES	Senior Executive Service
U.S.	United States
U.S.C.	United States Code
VBA	Veterans Benefits Administration
VHA	Veterans Health Administration



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Department of Veteran Affairs Overview

To care for him who shall have born the battle and for his widow and his orphan.

— Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address”

With these seventeen simple words, President Abraham Lincoln defined the mission of the Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA), some 124 years before its birth. The DVA arguably has one of the most important and solemn missions of any governmental department. For this reason, it is of the upmost importance that we entrust the most compassionate, competent, and honorable of public servants with the business of caring for our nations Veterans.

The DVA has a long and prestigious history, which is firmly rooted in the foundation of colonial America. The residents of the colony of Plymouth were the first people to determine that it was proper to provide a pension to those men that engaged in battle against the Indians in defense of the colony. The Continental Congress also determined that it was necessary to provide pension benefits to the soldiers fighting in the Revolutionary War against England. The main purpose was to increase the number of enlistments in the Continental Army and to decrease the number of desertions among those that had previously enlisted. However, the Continental Congress lacked authority to appropriate funds. Therefore, it was up to each individual state to appropriate funds to these Veterans. However, by and large, most never fulfilled these obligations and it was

not until ratification of the Constitution of the United States and the first pension laws passed in 1789 that the majority of Veterans receive pension benefits (DVA 2006).

Until the year 1816, little had changed concerning the number of pensioners or the laws governing these pensions. Prior to 1816, the government administered Veterans' pensions based on a qualifying wartime disability. However, in 1816, a need-based pension law was passed which provided a need-based pension for Veterans who served during the Revolutionary War. Just a short four years later, pension records boasted approximately 15,530 Veterans compared to the 2,220 pensioners at the beginning of 1816. As a result, payments exceeded one million dollars for the first time in history, which resulted in a 91 percent increase in benefit payments (DVA 2006).

The American Civil War had a profound impact on Veterans' benefits due to the large number of disabled wartime Veterans, as well as a large number of surviving family members. In 1862, Congress passed the General Pension Act. This act provided greater benefits for survivors as well as pensions based on rank and degree of disability and for the first time in history, pensions for diseases incurred during service. This law also extended pension benefits to Veterans serving during peacetime and established the National Cemetery System. Laws barred all survivors of Veterans of the Confederacy and family members from receiving Veterans benefits. It was not until 1958 when Congress pardoned these service members that a lone survivor of a Confederate Veteran received benefits. Prior to the American Civil War, medical care for Veterans was limited to three facilities, one located in Philadelphia and two in Washington, DC. However, the war created a substantial demand for medical care for Veterans resulting in the government establishing numerous facilities to meet this demand. In the years following the Civil

War, pension acts of the 1890s resulted in a significant expansion of benefits and the expansion of the National Cemetery System (DVA 2006).

The first two decades of the twentieth century resulted in significant change in Veterans' laws and the organizations administering these laws. In large part, this was due to the United States entry into World War I. In 1912, Congress passed the Sherwood Act, which provided a pension to all Veterans regardless of disability status. This law provided a pension to Civil War and Mexican War Veterans at the age of sixty-two without regard to disability. In 1917, the War Risk Insurance Act, among other things, provided Veterans with vocational rehabilitation and training. This period also saw increased access to healthcare for Veterans. Up until World War I, various agencies administered Veterans benefits. However, following World War I, Congress recognized the need to consolidate some of these functions and in 1921, established the Veterans Bureau (DVA 2006).

On July 21, 1930, President Herbert Hoover signed Executive Order 5398. This order formally established the Veterans Administration and vested authority in a new Administrator of the Veterans Administration through the President of the United States. The purpose of the Executive Order was to consolidate activities and functions of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, the Bureau of Pension, and the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers under a single agency. This new agency would be responsible for administering the established laws related to Veterans' benefits and the coordination of all activities under one agency (Hoover 1930).

The Veterans Administration managed Veterans' benefits until 1989, when Public Law 100-527 formally established the DVA and created a new leadership structure to

include establishing the position of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Today, the DVA is the second largest department in the federal government and is organized under three administrations: Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) (VA Learning University 2013).

Since its birth in 1989, the DVA has grown in order to meet the demands of Veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to meet the needs of the aging Vietnam Veteran population. The 2015 DVA budget request totaled 163.9 billion dollars and outlined the objective of achieving three primary goals. The first goal is to make benefits and services more accessible to Veterans by expanding services. The second goal is to eliminate a claims backlog, defined as claims with a rating end product greater than 125 days. Finally, the goal is to end homelessness among the Veteran population by the end of 2015. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified two areas that may have serious impacts on the department's ability to achieve these goals. The first high-risk area the GAO identified was the ability for the department to improve and modernize disability programs. The second was the ability to manage strategic human capital, which was not only a high-risk area for the DVA but rather a government wide issue. In addition, the DVA Office of Inspector General (OIG) identified several serious management challenges facing the DVA in the coming years, which include challenges in health care delivery, benefits processing, financial management, procurement practices, and information management (DVA 2014b) These are critical challenges facing the VA, which will require strong focused leadership at the Senior Executive Service (SES) level.

## Analysis of Current and Future Organizational Challenges within the DVA

At this time in history, the DVA is experiencing record levels of demand throughout all administrations. This is a result of several factors, which include the two recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, an aging Vietnam Veteran population that is afflicted with presumptive conditions related to Agent Orange exposure, and a resultant loss of significant numbers of World War II Veterans due to age. In order to meet these increasing demands, then Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki recognized the need to transform the department and began the process in 2010.

The NCA has seen the number of burials increase over the past several years. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 alone, the NCA laid to rest 125,185 of our nation's Veterans and projections show that burials will increase through the year 2020 (NCA 2015). Likewise, VHA has seen a significant increase in demand for health care services from Veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn. Of this population, over 60 percent have sought DVA healthcare since the year 2001 with almost 700,000 seeking healthcare in FY14 alone (DVA 2014c).

In recent years, VBA has seen explosive growth in the number of benefit claims received as well as an increase in the number of contentions per claim. During the past three years, VBA has processed over one million claims in each of these years. Despite this fact, receipts have outpaced the number of completed claims, which has resulted in a significant backlog of claims. Former Secretary Shinseki established the goals of eliminating the backlog of claims, processing all claims within 125 days, and increasing the quality of claims processed to 98 percent accuracy. In order to realize this goal, VBA

began a transformation process, which focused on three key areas: people, processes, and technology (DVA 2015).

In order to ensure the maximum use of the department's human resources, VBA restructured the organization and training methods within the regional offices. With the goal of bringing claims processors together, improving claim accuracy and ensuring appropriate routing of claims, the department established Cross-Functional Teams, Quality Review Teams and Intake Processing Centers. With the goal of improving processes, VBA made several significant changes in the way claims are processed. VBA implemented the Fully Developed Claims process with the purpose of allowing a Veteran to submit all claims documents at one time therefore reducing or eliminating development time. The employment of Disability Benefit Questionnaires simplified the disability examination process for Veterans as well as VBA claims processors, and VHA examination providers. Restructuring into segmented lanes allowed VBA to assign claims for processing in a more efficient way with the goal of increasing timeliness of claims processing (DVA 2015).

Prior to 2010, DVA used antiquated systems to process claims and communicate with Veterans. Before the transformation initiative, the majority of VBA claims were in paper format with a small percentage in an electronic format in an antiquated platform. The paper system was very labor intensive, required advanced planning and a significant number of man-hours to pull, distribute, and transport claims files throughout the Regional Office and to medical facilities. This system resulted in claim delays and considerable expense related to personnel costs, maintenance of files, and transportation costs. Under the technology transformation initiative, VBA introduced the Veterans Benefits

Management System (VBMS), arguably the largest technology initiative introduced. VBMS is a digital system in which records are scanned, digitized, created, and stored. Once digitization occurs, DVA claims adjudicators then process all subsequent claims within the system. This creates efficiency as there are no claims files to pull or transport, and access to claims is available twenty-four hours a day from any VBA office or healthcare facility worldwide. Secondly, VBA introduced eBenefits in order to allow claimants to access, submit, and manage their claims online, thereby providing more timely information to Veterans regarding their claims. Finally, VBA introduced the Veterans Relationship Management, which is a platform that allows VBA to securely communicate and share information with external stakeholders such as DVA contractors (DVA 2015).

Some examples of the future challenges that will require flexible change minded leadership, include a Veteran population projected to migrate toward the Southern and Western regions of the country. This will result in the need for a more adaptable infrastructure that can meet the demand for services in these areas as the population shift occurs. Another example is ever-changing technology. As technology changes, the DVA will need forward thinking leaders, that are able to understand the need to promote new technology within the department, not only for communication with Veterans, but in all business lines. This not only requires individuals capable of leading change but also requires someone with strong business acumen. In addition, during a period of diminishing resources and the requirement to do more with less, the DVA will need transformational minded leaders that will have the ability to leverage resources from a variety of sources to include some outside the agency. Accomplishing this will require

individuals that are not only change minded, but also those capable of building coalitions (DVA 2014a).

There is no doubt that while in recent years, the DVA has made enormous improvements to transform the primary administrations in order to provide better service to our nations Veterans, many challenges lay ahead which will require executives that can meet these challenges and continue the work of their predecessors. In order to meet these challenges, the DVA must be able to develop leaders that have the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ) previously identified. These ECQs, as outlined by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), are more than bureaucratic catchphrases, but rather are a few simple and succinct ideas, which capture the essence of the qualities, which exemplify the best qualities of senior executives. Possessing these core qualifications as identified by OPM is a fundamental necessity for any executive to possess whether they work at the DVA, another government agency, or in the corporate world.

### Significance

In 1978, the Congress established the SES with the goal of providing the federal government with a pool of senior executives that were capable of leading government agencies. Since the SES was established, Booz, Allen, Hamilton, a management and technology consulting firm points out that the problems now faced by the SES have become more complex and more global in nature. They point to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, critical economic concerns, aging populations, and ongoing budget concerns as examples. It is for reasons such as these that the authors argue that now more than ever, the government needs strong senior executives. However, the authors maintain that the government has never achieved the goals for the SES, as originally described in



the 1978 legislation. They contend that it no longer meets the leadership needs of the government today. They state, “The federal government has faced a leadership gap, and that gap has only grown given the challenges currently confronting our nation.” For this reason, they conducted a study to assist in solving this problem (Booz Allen Hamilton 2009).

During this study of the SES, there were several significant findings related to the primary research question proposed by this thesis. First, the authors argue that many members of the SES are inappropriately classified. These persons are technical experts that fill critical leadership positions, when in fact, they are working in scientific and technical positions in which they spend little time in leadership activities. A second contention is that the federal government does a poor job of data collection in multiple areas; and specifically, they fail to measure the effectiveness of SES development and training programs. Third, the government is failing to recognize and cultivate leaders to fill the positions created with the surge of projected retirements in the coming years. This is of critical importance to the government because the corporate workforce is a younger force than its government counterpart is. Finally, and of major concern, is that government agencies are failing to identify, prepare, and mentor talented employees to fill future vacancies in the ranks of the SES for fear of violating merit system principles governing selection and competition for positions. The authors note that the corporate sector and the U.S. military do a better job at identifying and mentoring these individuals than the civil sector of the government does (Booz Allen Hamilton 2009).

### Primary Objective

The primary objective of this thesis is to consider the courses of action the DVA should take in order to ensure continuity of leadership within the department. Specifically, the objective is to ascertain what should occur in order to ensure an adequate succession plan is in place to provide orderly transitions within the department's SES ranks. A recent study conducted by McKinsey and Company, titled *Building the Leadership Bench: Developing a Talented Pipeline for the Senior Executive Service* cited OPM data, which revealed that over 60 percent of SES employees employed by the DVA would be eligible to retire within five years (McKinsey and Company 2013). While it is highly improbable that all of these executives will leave service within five years, there is the potential for significant turnover within the SES ranks at the DVA. The scope of this thesis will be limited to succession planning within the DVA and will not provide analysis of other agencies' plans except for the purposes of comparing and contrasting programs.

### Primary Research Question

What leadership development opportunities should the DVA provide to individuals in order to prepare them for the SES, thus ensuring effective succession planning within the DVA?

### Secondary Research Questions

One of the major initiatives defined in the DVA Strategic Plan FY 2010-2014 was to "Transform Human Capital" (Office of the Secretary, DVA 2010, 56-57 In this document, the department stated the "VA will further develop our capabilities to monitor

and manage the department's SES workforce to better leverage our full skills and capabilities and increase transparency across organizational boundaries.” The DVA cited that the department established a corporate SES office to assist in achieving this objective (Office of the Secretary, DVA 2010, 56-57).

What obstacles might the DVA face in terms of developing SES candidates?

At what General Schedule (GS) rank/managerial level, should the DVA begin to identify potential SES candidates?

What are some of the obstacles in developing SES candidates?

### Assumptions

Based on the number of SES personnel that are eligible for retirement within the next five years, the DVA needs a robust succession plan. The DVA needs to provide more opportunities for development among supervisory employees in the GS grades of GS-13 through GS-15. The DVA needs to increase the number of employees, which graduate the SES Candidate Development Program.

### Definitions

Executive Core Qualifications: ECQ are five qualifications that OPM has defined as the “competencies needed to build a federal corporate culture that drives for results, serves customers, and builds successful teams and coalitions within and outside the organization” (OPM 2014b) These qualifications are required prior to an individual's entry into the SES. The ECQs are: leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions (OPM 2014b).

General Schedule: GS is a classification system used by the OPM for the majority of white-collar employees of the Federal government. The schedule has grades ranging from GS-1 to GS-15 with ten step rates within each grade (OPM 2014a).

Merit System Principles: (MSP) Nine principles, which govern the Executive Branch employees of the U.S. government as outlined in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (MSPB 2015).

Prohibited Personnel Practices: The U.S. Office of Special Council defines a Prohibited Personnel Practice (PPP) as “employment-related activities that are banned in the federal workforce because they violate the merit system through some form of employment discrimination, retaliation, improper hiring practices, or failure to adhere to laws, rules, or regulations that directly concern the merit system principles” (U.S. Office of Special Counsel 2015).

Secretary of Veterans Affairs: The Secretary of Veterans Affairs is the individual appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the U.S. Senate to administer the laws of the department and to provide overall management of the department (VA Learning Univ. 2013).

Senior Executive Service: The SES is a corps of executives that serve in positions just below presidential appointees that are responsible for leading government activities across the scope of federal agencies (OPM 2014c).

Succession Planning: OPM defines succession planning as: “A systematic approach to building a leadership pipeline/talent pool to ensure leadership continuity. Developing potential successors in ways that best fit their strengths. Identifying the best

candidates for categories of positions. Concentrating resources on the talent development process yielding a greater return on investment” (OPM 2005, 1).

#### Limitations

Time constraints will likely be a limitation of this study. In addition, proposed or pending legislation in the U.S. Congress could also have an impact.

#### Delimitations

Research will be limited to the DVA and employees of the department, and will not focus on other governmental agencies except for comparison and contrast or for consideration of best practices. This is due to the aforementioned time constraint.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an extensive amount of published material available to aid in this research thesis. There is a wide array of literature regarding the subjects of civil service reform, succession planning, strategic human resources management systems, and SES. Published resources include materials spanning from 1978 to the present. Published materials come in the form of government statutes, other government documents, journal articles, magazine articles, news clips, and books.

#### History of the Civil Service and Merit System

The modern day civil service was born out of the desire for a more professional and competent civil servant. In the Vassar Miscellany, Volume XXVII, Number 9, June 1, 1898, Jeanette Morey so aptly noted that President Thomas Jefferson was the first president to exercise the use of the “Spoils System” concerning the appointment of civil servants (Morey 1898, 439-441). Morey noted that that Jefferson’s standard consisted of three questions, “Is he honest? Is he capable? Is he faithful to the constitution?” (Morey 1898, 439-441). Morey further opined that Andrew Jackson was arguably one of the greatest abusers of the spoils system of appointment, noting that he brought appointees with him to Washington and installed them in office (Morey 1898, 439-441). An article from the University of Virginia, Miller Center titled “Rotation in Office and The Spoils System,” noted that when Jackson entered office he removed many high-ranking government officials citing corruption among the reasons. The article noted that Jackson cited reform as the motivation; however, many positions were merely political rewards.

The most notorious appointment was that of a man named Samuel Swartwout whom Jackson appointed as the collector of the New York City customhouse who subsequently departed with over one million dollars, which today would equate to over twenty-one million (Miller Center 2014).

However, the main impetus for reform was the assassination of President James A. Garfield. An insane man by the name of Charles J. Guiteau assassinated Garfield because he had not received a civil service appointment that he felt that he deserved. The public demanded political reform, and as a result, the Pendleton Act was enacted which required appointments to be based on merit and competitive examinations rather than political patronage. The law also provided protection to individuals to prevent removal or demotion based on political reasons. In order to ensure compliance, the law established a Civil Service Commission (Mintz and McNeil 2013).

The *Biography of an Ideal: A History of the Federal Civil Service* cites five phases of civil service reform. Phase I is defined as the “Staid” period, which is the period prior to 1829, during which time the civil service was born (OPM 2003, 7). Phase II is described as the “Spoils Era” which is defined as the period when Jackson was sworn in as President in 1829 and lasted until 1871 (OPM 2003, 7). This was a time when political appointment was the norm and politicians made the appointments following the victory of their respective party. Phase III, the period from 1871 to 1833, is described as the “unspectacular” years as there were very few senior executive jobs (OPM 2003, 7). Phase IV, beginning in 1833 is considered the founding of the “modern civil service,” as employees are posted worldwide with a robust executive pool (OPM 2003, 7). Finally, Phase V marks the period subsequent to the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act of

1978 and the establishment of a repetitive performance management system (OPM 2003, 7).

### MSP

The first MSP as outlined in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, states that agencies, based upon equitable and open competition, must recruit individuals from the whole of society and from suitable sources. Agencies must endeavor to hire and promote individuals based upon merit and consider their knowledge, skills, and abilities, with the goal of providing equal opportunity for all individuals. The second principle is that you cannot discriminate against employees and applicants for employment based upon the common factors found in federal law such as: race, political affiliation, color, religion, sex, marital status, or physical handicap. Additionally, employees have a right to fair treatment and employers must respect individual constitutional and privacy rights. The third MSP outlines the requirement for equal pay based on equal value and provides consideration for incentives based on exceptional performance. The fourth principle requires that all public employees conduct themselves in an appropriate manner, be honest, and consider the public interest in the conduct of their work. The fifth principle obliges all employers to use the federal workforce in an efficient and effective manner. The sixth principle requires that agencies maintain an individual based on satisfactory employment, correct any deficiencies, and separate from employment anyone unwilling or unable to meet the required performance standards. The seventh principle states that agencies should provide education and training for individuals with the goal of improving the performance of both the individual and the agency. The eighth principle, and one that is particularly applicable to this discussion as it prohibits employers from showing



favoritism, taking any arbitrary action against an employee, or using coercion or official authority for political purposes with the intent of affecting an election. The final merit principle protects employees from any type of reprisal based upon “whistleblower” protections for violations of the law, mismanagement and fraud, or waste and abuse (Legal Information Institute 2015).

### PPP

Discussion of MSP cannot take place without addressing PPP. Title 5 U.S.Code (U.S.C.) statute 2302 outlines twelve PPPs, which the law forbids in managing the executive branch workforce. The Merit System Protection Board (MSPB) cites the need to understand the definition of a PPP and to understand who can commit a PPP. MSPB defines a PPP as:

A personnel action means an appointment, promotion, disciplinary action, detail, transfer, reassignment, reinstatement, restoration, reemployment, or performance evaluation. It also can include any other decision concerning pay, benefits, awards, training, psychiatric testing, or any other significant change in duties, responsibilities, or working conditions. (MSPB 2015)

Further, the MSPB notes that there are circumstances where a PPP could occur based upon the inaction of an individual that was capable of committing a PPP. The MSPB also conveys the importance of knowing individuals within an agency capable of producing a PPP and the importance of understanding the motive behind the action. The MSPB defines an individual capable of committing a PPP as: “any employee who has authority to take, direct others to take, recommend, or approve any personnel action” (MSPB 2015). However, the MSPB cautions that individuals capable of committing a prohibited act do not necessarily have to hold a supervisory position within an agency. It can be any individual capable of taking, recommending or approving a personnel action

as per the definition as noted above. In addition, the law also considers the motivation of the person committing the PPP when determining whether an action constitutes a prohibited action (MSPB 2015).

The twelve PPPs cover activities such as:

1. Discrimination based on specific demographic data
2. Solicitation of hiring recommendations
3. Coercion
4. Obstruction regarding competition for employment
5. Using influence to prevent someone from seeking employment
6. Proving unauthorized preference in hiring,
7. Nepotism
8. Retaliation based upon a status as a whistleblower
9. Reprisal based on appeal or grievance
10. Discrimination based upon conduct which does not hinder job performance
11. Willful violation of Veterans preference in employment
- 12 Violation of any rules which execute MSP (MSPB 2015).

#### Birth of the SES

During the State of the Union Address in 1978, President Jimmy Carter stated, “The best organized government will only be as effective as the people who carry out its policies. For this reason, I consider civil service reform to be absolutely vital” (Carter 1978b). Carter cited greater management flexibility, performance rewards, ability to remove non-performing employees and job security as methods for fostering a more efficient and open government. In his final State of the Union Address, Carter touted civil

service reform as one of his administration's accomplishments (Carter 1978b; Carter 1981). President Carter took this initiative because he perceived there were multiple problems which needed to be addressed in order to bring greater accountability and efficiency to government. Carter believed the merit system principles and prohibited personnel practices would result in an equitable system for all employees. Based upon this new performance system, employees' performance would be objectively evaluated and it would assist managers with personnel actions such as hirings, dismissals, rewards, and punishment of employees (Carter 1978a).

Congress enacted Public Law 95-453, otherwise known as the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. In the findings and statement of purpose, the 95th Congress wrote, "in order to provide the people of the United States with a competent, honest, and productive Federal workforce reflective of the Nation's diversity, and to improve the quality of public service, Federal personnel management should be implemented consistent with merit system principles and free from prohibited personnel practices" (Civil Service Reform Act 1978). This passage clearly demonstrated the intent of the Congress to provide the nation with a higher quality of public service. The law addressed multiple areas to include merit principles, performance appraisal and adverse actions, staffing merit pay, various programs, labor management relations, grade and pay retention and other miscellaneous issues. However, one of the most significant changes that this law produced was the establishment of the SES. Regarding the creation of the SES, Congress stated that the establishment was, "to ensure that the executive management of the Government of the United States is responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the Nation and otherwise is of the highest quality" (Civil Service Reform

Act 1978). The law in part, defined the SES as positions in the grade of GS-16 through GS-18 and Level IV or V of the Executive Schedule or equivalent that did not require presidential appointment. This was necessary in order to have the ability to reassign and transfer career employees within these grades to the SES without competition. The law further mandated establishment of career appointee criteria, instituted a probationary period, required the establishment of qualification standards, and tasked OPM with establishing development programs or providing oversight of agency development programs for SES candidate development. The law gave regulatory authority and general oversight to OPM in order to ensure implementation of the law (Civil Service Reform Act 1978).

### ECQ

The ECQs as currently defined by OPM are: leading change, leading people, results driven, business acumen, and building coalitions. The core qualification, leading change, centers on the ability to foster strategic change, meet the goals of the organization, establish a vision for the organization, and to accomplish this during an environment of unrelenting change. The core qualification, leading people, entails having the requisite skills necessary to develop employees and foster an environment that is conducive to teamwork so that all employees will work toward the accomplishment of the agency's vision, mission, and goals. The core qualification, being results driven, is having the knowledge, skills and abilities to ensure that the goals of the organization are realized and the ability to make tough decisions while managing associated risks. The core qualification, business acumen, entails the knowledge, skills, and abilities to manage simultaneously the agency's human, financial, and information resources in a way that

maximizes each resource when combined, to the benefit of the public. Lastly, the core qualification, building coalitions, represents the ability required of the executive to build partnerships both internally and externally for the benefit of the agency that they serve (OPM 2014b). In addition to the ECQs required by OPM, the DVA requires all prospective executives to possess one additional core competency: demonstrating a global perspective. This core qualification requires the individual to have an expansive view of DVA's role within the federal government and in the community in which the DVA operates (VA Learning University 2013).

### Succession Planning

In an article in *Transforming Government* titled "Succession Planning Process," OPM defines succession planning as: "a systematic approach to building a leadership pipeline/talent pool to ensure leadership continuity, developing potential successors in ways that benefit their strengths, identifying the best candidates for categories of positions, and concentrating resources on the talent development process yielding a greater return on investment" (OPM 2005, 1). OPM outlines several factors found in successful programs. First, senior leaders must become involved in the process and take accountability for ensuring the growth of subordinate leaders. In addition, it is necessary to identify potential employees who are dedicated to their own development, then strategically satisfy future needs of the agency by selecting adept individuals using leadership competencies to aid in the selection process. Third, development of individuals requires providing the individual with an array of wide-ranging and demanding experiences. Fourth, senior leadership must ensure that significant coordination with human resources occurs to make certain that challenges such as

recruitment, retention, and diversity are considered. Finally, agencies must use current workforce data to conduct analysis that ensures validity of the process (OPM 2005, 1).

OPM outlines a six-step process to ensure successful succession planning within agencies. The first recommendation is that leaders must strategically link workforce-planning decisions; second, leaders must analyze gaps, which exist; third, leaders should identify individuals that exhibit potential or real aptitude; fourth, develop a strategy; fifth, implement it. Finally, leaders must continually monitor and evaluate the process, and implement changes as needed in order to ensure effectiveness throughout the process (OPM 2005, 2).

In an article, which appeared in the *Academic Physician and Scientist* titled “The Need for Succession Planning,” Luanne Thorndyke and Kevin Grigsby cite several advantages to having a good succession plan. The first is that succession planning allows organizations to maintain continuity in the area of organizational performance. Another advantage cited was that this allows organizations to retain a base of organizational knowledge in the event a leader leaves the organization. The final advantage cited by Thorndyke and Grigsby is that succession planning allows the current leader to focus on their own future beyond the constraints of the current organization (Thorndyke and Grigsby 2005, 2-3).

In an article titled “Planning for the Next Generation” Mike Kerlin, David McGraw, and William Wolf of McKinsey and Company, a global consulting firm, notes that successful agencies are proactive in their approach to succession planning and that agencies should explore multiple sources for talent needed to fill critical positions. The authors’ note the importance of government agencies being proactive because

government executives tend to be older and retire at a younger age than do their equivalents in the private sector. McKinsey and Company identified three effective succession-planning methods that the private sector employs. First, private corporations implement a strategic plan. Next, the private sector casts a broad net when seeking to fill positions rather than simply looking for those that are already familiar to leadership within the organization. Finally, they point out private entities, “Find creative ways to address HR policies that would otherwise hamper the leadership development that is necessary to good succession plans” (Kerlin, McGaw, and Wolf 2008, 9-13).

Kerlin, McGaw, and Wolf offer several proposals for agencies to prepare for succession planning: First, they suggest organizations hold regular succession planning meetings in order to determine where gaps and strengths exist within the organization. They recommend having visual aids to present the issues at hand. The authors noted public European agencies, which, after meetings such as this, identified individuals with potential. They urged those employees to follow development plans, which included opportunities for relocation, assignment to new positions or projects, which would assist them acquiring the requisite skills to fill future voids within the agency. Next, the authors cited the need to look not just at succession plans in terms of those with an executive status, but also to look at succession planning for other key positions within the agency. The authors suggest this is also a time to look at the job description for each position, ensure that the organization clearly defines what requirements are essential to the position, and then revise descriptions as needed in order to aid in recruitment of the best candidates (Kerlin, McGaw, and Wolf 2008, 9-13).

In the article in the journal, *Popular Government* titled “Has Anyone Heard the Alarm? Succession Planning,” author Christina Ritchie notes that organizations differ greatly in their planning needs, although there are some common issues. Ritchie cites six planning measures that should occur when considering succession planning. The first is including senior management and gaining their support. By including senior leaders, you not only gain their support but you also provide an invaluable service to the organization. In addition, senior leaders must promote succession planning throughout the ranks to ensure that everyone in the organization, from the top down, understands the need and benefits to the agency. Secondly, senior leaders must determine precisely what the current and future workforce needs of the organization are. Ritchie advises that organizations should consider factors such as projected retirements, rates of turnover, ages of workers, and required skill sets. After a thorough analysis of data, leaders should compare both the current and future needs when developing a succession plan. Another requirement is to determine what positions are essential to the success of the organization. Ritchie also suggests determining competencies that the organization expects from these leaders in order to establish standards and cites the OPM leadership basis as a starting point. Yet another suggestion is to create groups of talented persons that can step in and fill a given role rather than identifying specific individuals to fill a role once the need arises to fill a specific vacancy. An additional planning effort that Ritchie identified was providing the right development opportunities such as target educational opportunities, mentoring, coaching, feedback, and the establishment of Individual Development Plans. As a final point, after taking the aforementioned steps, organizational leadership must monitor and gauge whether or not the program is effective



in supporting the strategic goals of the organization and that employee development measures are effective (Ritchie 2007, 26-28).

#### DVA Senior Executive Service

In 2012, the DVA employed 387 SES employees or approximately 5 percent of all federal executives. This represents an approximate 22 percent increase from 2008 levels (OPM 2012, 5-6). According to the *Department of Veteran Affairs FY2014-2020 Strategic Plan*, greater than 30 percent of all DVA employees, and approximately 50 percent of all SES employees are eligible to retire. The strategic plan recognizes these challenges and acknowledges the need for succession planning in order to meet the needs of the agency in the future (DVA 2014a, 16). In a report titled *Building the Leadership Bench: Developing a Talent Pipeline for the SES*, McKinsey and Company revealed that between FY2005 and June 2012, the DVA graduated fifty-six graduates from their SES Candidate Development Program. Of the fifty-six graduates, approximately 28 percent entered the SES within one year, approximately 39 percent entered within two years, and 51 percent by June 2012. Data revealed that there were 307 SES employees in the DVA as of 2012, with approximately 56 percent eligible to retire within three years and approximately 63 percent eligible to retire within five years. McKinsey and Company also looked at retirement trends of career SES employees from 2008 to 2012, which revealed that the SES employee retirement rate was between 8 and 10 percent per year. Of all SES employed by the DVA in 2012, 9 percent were employed from outside the federal government, 13 percent were CDP graduates and 77 percent were non-Candidate Development Program graduates. In addition, the data shows the average tenure of an

employee before joining the SES was eighteen and a half years, with fifty being the average age (McKinsey and Company 2014, 8, 28-29, 31-32).

### Application of Strategic Planning

There are several essential requirements the RAND Corporation has identified as necessary in order to accomplish workforce planning at the strategic level. The first and most obvious is to select the appropriate individuals to facilitate the organizational goals. Workforce planning should be closely associated with the organization's strategic plan in order to be effective. The work, *Workforce Planning in the Intelligence Community: A Retrospective*, identifies several benefits to workforce development. Among these are the creation of a strategic foundation by which decisions are made, proactively predicting organizational needs rather than making decisions on immediate requirements, mitigating organizational risk by determining which positions should be considered for elimination or which should be fortified and creating appropriate plans with regards to staffing, and succession planning (Nemfakos et al. 2013, 13).

The article *Workforce Planning in the Intelligence Community: A Retrospective*, Nemfakos et al. identifies a five-step workforce-planning model, described as the "Fundamental building blocks for all government agencies" (Nemfakos et al. 2013, 13). The first step is to conduct a strategic assessment that aligns the workforce with the strategic goals of the agency, which will assist in providing a strategic pathway and outlines a vision for the organization to follow. The second step requires the organization to gather and analyze data related to the current workforce in order to obtain needed demographic data, data related to the composition of the workforce, future workforce requirements, and to identify any gaps that may be present. The third step focuses on

identifying and closing the gaps in the previous step by engaging cooperation between leadership and Subject Matter Experts, identifying best practices and exploring new methodologies, conveying priorities, and determining what success looks like. The fourth step of planning focuses on developing plans, which are then prepared for execution and implementation. Finally, the fifth step concentrates on the assessment of the strategies by ensuring the viability of gap strategies and modification of action policies in order to discover measures and identifying accountability procedures. The authors point out those in leadership positions must continually revisit and revise this planning process as strategic policies of the agency change and external factors such as technology and policy shifts affect the workforce (Nemfakos et al. 2013, 13-15).

#### Considerations when Conducting Strategic Planning

As previously mentioned, the DVA faces a significant challenge should the SES workforce decline precipitously due to projected retirements and other personnel factors. Nemfakos et al., point out that current budget issues are very similar to the budget years of the 1990s where government agencies made significant personnel cuts. They stress the importance for agencies to avoid making mistakes of the past. Further, they point out the importance of retaining a group of midcareer level professionals from which agencies can groom higher-level leaders of the future (Nemfakos et al. 2013, 46).

Another consideration when conducting strategic planning is risk. The authors, Nemfakos et al. point out that national security priorities are fluid and that it is imperative that when conducting workforce planning, that agencies consider risk. Considering future risk will aid agencies in making better decisions about the allocation of resources related to personnel and planning. Consideration of risk is also important to the development of a

methodical approach based upon strategic guidance, in order to pre-emptively anticipate and make changes to the workforce (Nemfakos et al. 2013, 47).

Concerning leadership, the GAO recognizes the importance of senior leaders, both political and career, communicating and promoting an agency's vision, goals, and strategies. Further, the GAO recognizes the need for agencies to seek continuous organizational advancement if the agency desires to become a high-performing organization. While the GAO acknowledges this is a long-standing process, they recommend that agencies have a long-term succession planning strategy that ensures stability during periods of leadership transition (GAO 2000, 17).

The GAO recommends that agencies consider three critical areas when creating a succession plan. First, senior leadership needs to determine the type of leader and the expectations for that leader. One way to do this is to ensure the alignment of SES employees' vision and performance standards with the agency's mission and that they carefully apply leadership standards and benchmarks when making these decisions. Second, senior executives should follow a specific strategy to communicate and promote the goals of the agency through all levels of the organization that they lead. Finally, in order to ensure appropriate succession planning, agencies should be familiar with potential leadership needs and have a robust executive development program that provides developmental and educational opportunities as well as an opportunity to receive feedback (GAO 2000, 18-19).

#### Corporate Considerations

The Institute of Executive Development and the Rock Center for Corporate Governance at Stanford University conducted an examination in 2013 regarding

succession planning and executive development in the corporate world. The study reached several significant conclusions. The first was that corporations have not clearly identified individuals who are to fill senior executive positions in the future. In fact, the authors, David Larker and Scott Saslow found lists of would be successors are often not broad enough, so when the time comes to replace a senior executive, the list is often set aside. Another conclusion was that although corporations understand the need for succession planning, the majority do not actually have a written succession plan in place. This is partly because they do not take the time to identify, develop, and monitor the performance of would be successors. Additionally, corporations tend to focus on selecting a successor with the primary motive of risk mitigation rather than selecting the best persons to fill the vacant position. In other words, they tend to play it safe and avoid the downside of risk (Larcker and Saslow 2014, 1).

Larcker and Saslow note that a wide range of individuals play a part in successful succession planning, including board members, senior executives, and human resources personnel. Yet all too often, corporations do not designate the functions of these key players and do not compel their involvement in the process. Lastly, the writers note that executives treat talent development and succession planning as two separate undertakings, which results in executives failing to appreciate the skills and capabilities that potential candidates bring to the table (Larcker and Saslow 2014, 1).

In order to improve succession planning and talent development, the authors proposed several steps that could result in improvements. The first is to determine what knowledge and skills are required for all executive positions. The second is to weigh the knowledge and skills of potential successors based not only on the capacity to fulfil their

duties in their current area of responsibility, but to fill vacancies at a higher level within the organization. After completion of this step, the organization should conduct a gap analysis and make efforts to correct these deficiencies (Larcker and Saslow 2014, 2).

In addition, the authors recognize that challenges faced by organizations are fluid, and therefore recommend that leadership conduct a thorough assessment throughout the agency to ascertain what development opportunities leadership must provide to potential successors in the effort to move the agency forward. Another important consideration that senior leadership must take into account is that succession planning is an ongoing process that has no end, rather than considering it as a sporadic process based upon current or emerging needs. The authors point out that is also imperative to have one qualified and knowledgeable individual, who assumes responsibility for the succession planning process. Leadership must identify the other players and then hold them responsible for achieving the goals and outcomes of the plan. Another suggestion is to entwine succession planning with talent improvement programs designed to fill any identified gaps within the agency. Finally, the authors observed the importance of looking to outside organizations in order to gain new insight into best practices and where applicable, apply these to their organization (Larcker and Saslow 2014, 2).

### Leadership Development

In their article “Leadership Development Must Be Real: Responsive, Early, Accessible, Lasting” found in the journal *Public Manager*, Abraham Morrall and Theresa Spearman Ovbije contend that leadership development should begin once someone is hired into an agency in order to groom leaders for the wave of SES retirements projected to occur in the year 2020. Morrall and Ovbije maintain that it is incumbent upon

organizational leaders to design a leadership development construct, which incorporates individual development plans, leadership training, opportunities and activities, and exposure to various assignments. Within this leadership construct, the authors define several elements, which are critical to this type of development construct. These elements are strategic development opportunities, methods for tracking progress, and the development of individual and organizational competencies (Morrall and Ovbije 2014, 51-52).

The authors, Morrall and Ovbije suggest that executives develop a formal leadership program, which includes individual competencies that focus on areas that transform the agency, the development of executive skills, development of a strategic view of the agency, and a sense of what it means to be a public servant. In addition, Morrall and Ovbije assert that competencies must focus on the transformation of the entire agency, individuals, and the workforce as a whole. Furthermore, they propose that leadership conduct an organizational needs assessment in order to identify the competencies that the organization should promote and develop within their leadership ranks. Additionally, they recommend that leadership should build a plan of instruction around six core areas that they identified as administration, public service, transformation, current events, ethics, and human capital management (Morrall and Ovbije 2014, 52-54).

Additionally, the authors made several other recommendations. The first is to create a voluntary application process with the goal of gaining participants and creating awareness regarding succession planning within the organization. Secondly, employees in the GS-14 to GS-15 range should be targeted to participate in the program. Next,

establish teams to pilot the program and to manage the administrative tasks such as budgeting. Finally, have SES members provide lectures regarding development. However, Morrall and Ovbije do not place all of the responsibility upon the agencies and their leaders. The authors contend that employees should look for opportunities and experiences, which will enlarge their scope of knowledge regarding their organizational structure (Morrall and Ovbije 2014, 54).

In the 2010 article “Executive Coaching: Leadership Development in the Federal Government,” in the journal *Public Manager*, Richard (Rick) Koonce observes that while executive coaching is commonplace and is a leadership development instrument in the corporate world, it is not the case in the government sector. He points out that training programs within the federal government are inconsistent among federal government agencies for employees with paygrades between GS-13 and GS-15. In addition, those already serving in the SES ranks rarely, if ever, receive executive coaching when compared to their counterparts in the corporate world (Koonce 2010, 45).

Moreover, Koonce mentions several ways that the private sector prepares their leaders to assume greater responsibilities. First, he observes that the private sector provides additional opportunities to employees who are already strong performers with the goal of taking their performance to a new level. Second, they work to provide newly promoted leaders with the means necessary to ensure success within their new areas of responsibility. Third, executives strategically place leaders with strong capabilities throughout the organization with the intent of promoting them in the future, thereby creating a reserve of potential future executives. Fourth, the corporate world focuses on



building individual skills in potential future executives such as interpersonal skills and self-awareness (Koonce 2010, 45).

Koonce acknowledges that if these types of programs are to gain traction across the broader scope of government, it will likely be incumbent upon individual agencies to pilot them. The author suggests that agencies incorporate executive coaching within existing leadership development programs. He believes this is important because it allows the protégé to consider their own personal challenges, strengths, and weaknesses, and apply concepts taught in the classroom within the organization. Further, it is an opportunity for the mentor to assist the employee in identifying and correcting deficiencies (Koonce 2010, 45-46).

Further, the author identifies four key factors, which are necessary for an organization desiring to establish a successful executive coaching program within the organization. These include gaining buy in and participation from senior executives, deliberate selection of people that will mentor these leaders, calculated matching of mentors and mentees, and careful consideration regarding what assistance and expertise the organization will offer to these individuals. The author recommends that a fruitful program should span a period ranging from six to twelve months with the goal of furthering the performance of the agency through assisting these specific individuals in developing a greater self-awareness, developing professionally, and achieving a measure of personal development. The coaching program focuses on “soft skills” such as people skills, emotional intelligence, and greater self-awareness as opposed to traditional training programs, which tend to focus on hard skills (Koonce 2010, 46-50). The author recommends using tools such as 360-degree assessments and tests such as the Myers

Briggs in order to promote greater self-awareness. He contends that coaching is simply not just getting better at what you do during the course of a day at work, but rather it is important to view this process as an opportunity to achieve a personal transformation and the framework to establish a pattern of lifelong learning (Koonce 2010, 50).

In the article “GAO Mentors Build Relationships, Cultivate Talent, Make a Difference” found in *The Public Manager*, Lorene Sarne and Dorothy S. Goldsmith point out that the GAO uses a low cost mentoring program, which aids the agency in succession planning. The program is not integrated with the agency’s promotion system and participation in the program is strictly voluntary. The goals of the program are to provide development opportunities for future leaders within the agency, develop a greater appreciation and understanding of the agency and its mission, simply to make the staff more proficient at their jobs, and to increase job satisfaction. At the time of application, mentors and mentees determine whether they wish to participate in a group or individual mentoring program. The individual mentoring program provides a confidential medium for mentors and mentees to exchange knowledge and information (Sarne and Goldsmith 2013, 16-17).

The GAO program is available in a six or nine-month option. Based on the interests of the participating individuals, mentors and mentees are paired with one another. The mentor has the option of declining to mentor a particular individual as the agency wants to ensure that the relationship is mutually beneficial. The authors indicate that employees benefit from the program in several ways. To begin with, this provides employees an opportunity to network with people from different areas within the agency. Next, it assists employees in developing talents related to their position. In addition, the

mentor and protégé relationship allows a forum to discuss things that they otherwise would not with their immediate supervisor. However, the authors point out that the mentee is not the only individual that benefits from this relationship; the mentor does as well. According to the authors, this provides mentors an opportunity to network, improve their leadership and communication skills, and give them a sense of self-worth and satisfaction for assisting someone else (Sarne and Goldsmith 2013, 16-17).

The authors outline four elements that they contend have made the program a success. First, they cite the backing of senior agency officials and describe it as the “Foundation on which the mentoring program is built” (Sarne and Goldsmith 2013, 18). The authors noted as an example, agency leadership appointed a Full Time Equivalent coordinator, who devotes 50 percent of their duty time to this program. In addition, participants may engage in program activities during regularly scheduled duty hours. The second element, which the authors reported to have contributed to the success of the program, is that both mentors and mentees are required to attend mandatory training sessions prior to the start of the program. This training establishes expectations for all participants and assists in dispelling myths about the program. The third element reported to have contributed to the success of the program, is that the agency has promoted the concept throughout the organization. This garners attention from those wishing to be mentors and from potential mentees as well. The program also targets supervisors to ensure that they maintain awareness about the program. The final element that Sarne and Goldsmith attribute to the success of the program is frequent communication. They observed that the program coordinator maintains contact with the participants at

scheduled intervals throughout the length of the program (Sarne and Goldsmith 2013, 19).

Due to the success of the program, the authors state that GAO plans to continue offering it into the future. In addition, they have plans to expand a part of the program where participants can engage in a virtual environment by leveraging technology. The authors stated that the program has allowed new employees to learn their jobs in a more expedient manner, has had a positive effect on current staff due to the positive energy it has created, and has served to develop new leaders. The agency has achieved these benefits during a period of declining budgets and economic woes (Sarne and Goldsmith 2013, 19).

In the 1981 article “Formalized Mentor Relationships for Management and Executive Development Programs in the Federal Government” found in the journal *Public Management Forum*, Rudi Klauss concludes that executive mentoring programs are useful as a subcomponent of a structured leadership development program as it provides benefits to the agency, individual protégé, and mentor. Klauss makes five recommendations regarding the inclusion of a mentoring component within an organizational leadership development program (Klauss 1981, 495-496).

The first recommendation that Klauss makes is that organizations should carefully select those who would serve as mentors in the program. Potential members must be committed to the relationship with the prospective protégé and willing to spend the time necessary to develop the protégé, respond to questions, etcetera. Further, the mentor must be warm, personable, and have the ability to speak frankly without being offensive. The mentor should also be able to establish trust with the individual he or she is mentoring.

Finally, the mentor must have broad experience in various types of executive positions in order to advise the protégé effectively (Klauss 1981, 495).

The second recommendation that Klauss makes is that the potential protégé should be active in the selection process of the mentor in order to ensure the relationship is an effective one. Klauss further recommended that the parties formalize the relationship early on in the process with the goal of defining roles and establishing requirements. The fourth recommendation is that the mentor and protégé should be aware that they both have responsibility to make sure that the relationship works. However, he noted that the protégé must have overall responsibility to ensure the relationship works. Finally, the author suggests that all parties involved must manage expectations when establishing a mentor/protégé relationship. All parties will have a work schedule to manage as well as other personal matters, and it is important to understand that due to these factors, certain limitations will naturally exist within the relationship. Therefore, he urges everyone to be aware of these issues and to exercise careful planning to avoid the inevitable pitfalls (Klauss 1981, 495-496).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to define the research methods used to support and evaluate the primary and secondary research questions of this thesis. There are numerous research methodologies that could have applied to this research project. The author acknowledges that a different method potentially could have yielded superior results. However, in order to complete this project in the allotted time, it was determined this was the most appropriate course of action. The method employed to conduct this research was the qualitative data collection method, which utilizes document review as the principal research medium.

Chapter 1 of this research thesis provided an historical overview of the DVA from its inception through the present in order to allow those with little or no knowledge of the department to gain a better understanding of the mission, entrusted to the employees that serve our nation's Veterans. The next section focused on the history of and significant findings related to the SES. Next, a brief description of the primary objective of the research project was provided followed by the primary research question as well as secondary research questions. This section was followed by some key definitions associated with this topic, assumptions that were made at the onset of the project, and finally some limitations and delimitations.

The second chapter of this research paper was comprised of an extensive review of selected literature related to the research topic, such as a brief history of the merit system, merit principles, PPPs, a historical review of the SES, an analysis of the SES ECQs, and succession planning. The review also included an examination of specific

DVA programs and procedures, the topic of succession planning, a review from a corporate perspective, and other closely related topics. Chapter 3 provides a brief explanation and review of the methodology of this research project.

Chapter 4 of this thesis will focus on analysis of the data and information gathered during the course of this research project. Analysis of data will take place with the intent of identifying connections and correlations within the data. Chapter 5 will focus on conclusions derived from review of the literature and analysis of the data. This chapter will present specific conclusions and recommendations based upon the research conducted and the subsequent analysis of the data.

The basis of this research project is existing data collection, compilation, and analysis conducted by government agencies, think tanks, and other public organizations. These organizations have spent a considerable amount of time in the collection, compilation, and analysis of data. The breadth and scope of the research previously conducted is far superior to any product that could be produced within the time allotted for completion of this project. In addition, these organizations have spent a considerable amount of capital on these studies. The author developed this study with a particular organization in mind, and therefore has the potential to address a critical organizational problem.

The weakness of this research project is, as previously mentioned, the time constraint of this project. Second, given the narrow scope of this project, it is primarily applicable only to the DVA and in a more general way for other government agencies with similar issues. However, generally speaking, it is relevant to the American population as, all Americans desire their government agencies to run efficiently and

effectively. In addition, given the author is employed by the agency being studied, there is likely to be a certain amount of unintentional bias which could potentially affect the research. Finally, given the amount of existing data which is available, this could pose a potential problem as it is quite a laborious process to sift through significant amounts of data in order to determine the material which is most relevant to the project at hand (President and Fellows Harvard University 2008).

Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary method, which researchers use to gain a better appreciation for a particular subject or subjects. This method allows the researcher to study in depth a particular subject matter. Further, this process assists the researcher in answering the five basic questions of who, what, when, where and why. The primary use of qualitative research is in the fields of social sciences, which include, but are not limited to psychology, sociology, education, communications, and leadership studies (Glenn 2010, 95).

A characteristic of qualitative research is that it is a very deliberate and targeted type of investigate method. Using this method allows the researcher to focus on a particular group or type of people, or a specific segment of the population. In other words, it is a very deliberate type of inquiry. Another hallmark of this type of study is that the researcher plays a key role in the process. Further, in qualitative research, there is no attempt to test a hypothesis, but rather the objective is to establish a premise. Qualitative research is also useful in answering the two primary questions of how and why particular results were or were not achieved. This method allows for a determination as to whether or not a program achieved desired outcomes related to areas such as



program implementation, expectations, operations, and the ability of key individuals to meet expectations (Glenn 2010, 96).

As previously discussed, this research project will utilize existing materials. The project will use existing documents from government organizations, think tanks, corporate offices, and other studies. In addition, this thesis will rely heavily upon previous studies conducted by researchers, philosophers, and authors in the academic world (President and Fellows Harvard University 2008). Analysis will be conducted with the intent of determining the consistency between similar types of studies or perhaps lack thereof. In his 2009 article titled “Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method,” Glenn A. Bowen defines document analysis as a “Systematic process for reviewing or evaluating documents” (Bowen 2009). He notes that these materials can consist of traditional printed documents or electronic documents such as documents existing on the internet (Bowen 2009).

This method of document analysis will be the solitary means of qualitative research used during this project. This is the best approach to use because there is a significant amount of historical data that will frame the problem and provide sufficient information related to the problem in question. An additional benefit to using existing document sources is that it has a strong potential to lead to further exploration and identify additional problems which had not been initially considered. This study will be interpretative in nature (Bowen 2009).

Another reason to use document analysis as the primary research method for this study is that it places the problem in context and has the potential to allow the investigator to see the development of the concerns related to succession over the course

of time. This is important in allowing the researcher to place the problem in the proper context (Bowen 2009). For example, the individual may reach the conclusion that this is a relatively new problem and may be able to find the root of the problem rather quickly. Conversely, they may reach the conclusion that this problem is deeply rooted within the organizational culture and developed over time. Having this type of knowledge can assist the researcher in developing and recommending appropriate solutions to problems (Bowen 2009).

An additional benefit to using this method is that it could direct further investigation. Reviewing multiple studies on a topic has the potential to lead the scholar to discover that pieces of evidence either contradict or corroborate one another. If the evidence is contradictory in nature, this can then compel the researcher to determine why the discrepancy exists. If pieces of evidence are corroborative, then it provides a certain amount of natural credibility to the research (Bowen 2009).

There are several other benefits to using this type of data collection for a project. First, the data already exists and therefore reduces the requirement to conduct time-consuming surveys and conduct follow-up requests regarding the responses. Second, it is available on the internet, in books, journals, and a wide variety of other places. Third, there is little or no cost involved as much of the information is available via electronic medium and eliminates the cost associated with the production of new data. Finally, it has the potential to reduce the research bias as the examiner does not have any stake in the data and can therefore look at the evidence in an objective manner (Bowen 2009).

While there are many advantages to the type of research method selected for this project, one must also consider that certain limitations also exist and should be

considered by both the researcher and anyone deliberating on the conclusions that the author has reached. The first limitation is that the author of the original study did not conduct the inquiry for the intended purpose. Therefore, the information may have limited value to the current project. Second, there is the potential that the documents are not accessible due to various factors. Third, since the researcher is selecting documents to include in his or her research, there is a natural selection bias that exists (Bowen 2009).

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

As presented in chapter 3, the method employed to conduct this study was qualitative data collection, utilizing document review as the principal method of inquiry. The following chapter will provide an analysis of the literature reviewed in chapter 2 of this thesis as it relates to the primary research question. In this chapter, a brief review will be provided regarding the importance of the SES as related to the primary research question. Following this, multiple reoccurring themes will be discussed which were discovered during the course of this project. In addition, it is necessary to analyze the MSPs and PPPs outlined in title 5 U.S.C.

As previously outlined, the stated goal of the establishment of the SES was to improve the quality of government service by ensuring the government had a cadre of senior executives who would serve to the needs of America's citizens. The task of these executives was to administer effectively the regulations and policies of the government, which would meet the broader objectives and goals of the nation. Congress established certain qualifications and tasked OPM with the oversight of training and executive development (Civil Service Reform Act 1978). However, given the large number of the department's SES employees that are eligible to retire in the near future, the DVA must have a robust succession plan in place which will prepare future leaders to assume responsibility for the tasks at hand, or risk being unprepared for future challenges.

### Importance of Basic Competencies

The ECQs established by OPM are critical for any executive to have; however, it is imperative that leaders possess certain basic competencies before there is any possibility of mastering any executive qualifications. Therefore, leaders should possess sufficient interpersonal skills to foster meaningful relationships, possess the ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, and possess the honesty and integrity to build trust and set an example for others to follow. Additionally, leaders should have a strong desire to broaden themselves through self-directed learning and have a strong desire for public service (OPM 2014d). Therefore, it is imperative that, before beginning any executive development program, organizations have a process in place to determine the level of basic competencies that employees possess and then work to develop these competencies within the organization. These competencies are valuable at all levels within the organization and not just the leadership ranks given that organizations tend to promote from within.

### Key Findings

There is no doubt that succession planning is a critical process that must occur within all organizations. For the corporate world, successful succession planning could potentially result in falling share prices, failure of the business to thrive, or at the very worst, could result in total failure of the business. For government agencies, it can lead to inefficiencies, confusion, lack of organizational direction, and an inability to provide effective service to the public. Based on the literature review regarding succession planning, there were several key themes that appeared throughout:

1. Organizations must have a strategic plan originating at the strategic level of the organization.
2. The involvement of senior leadership is of critical importance.
3. Identification and selection of the right individuals/pool of candidates is of great importance.
4. Providing the right experiences, assignments and opportunities to individuals is imperative to the process.
5. Proactively engaging and managing the succession planning process is a key to success.
6. Lifelong learning is critical to the growth and development of individuals and compliments formal education and training.

In the following sections, the importance of each one of these key points or themes will be discussed. Further, the reader will be provided with some examples of how many of America's Fortune 500 Companies are using these methods in order to provide developmental opportunities to leaders at all levels within their organizations. Conducting the analysis in this way will assist in answering the primary research question of this study.

#### Strategic Approach

First, and perhaps one consideration that should appear obvious, is the need for strategic succession planning, as Kerlin, McGaw, and Wolf pointed out (Kerlin, McGaw, and Wolf 2008, 9). It is however, imperative that organizations have a formal written succession plan in place, which originates from the strategic level, thus ensuring succession planning receives appropriate emphasis within the organization.

One illustration of a strategic and systematic approach to succession planning comes from the Fortune 500 Company Procter and Gamble (P&G). P&G sets the process in motion at the ground level by sharing their company's purpose, values, and principles with their employees, which they have carefully selected. Next, they give their leaders challenging assignments in order to provide needed experience. Senior executives are involved in the process through efforts such as recruiting, mentoring and coaching. In addition, they carefully select assignments for their leaders and provide broadening opportunities. Finally, the company views learning as a continuous process and provides various types of continuing education, some of which are formal and some of which are non-traditional (P&G 2014).

Another illustration of a strategic and systematic approach to succession planning comes from the Fortune 500 Company Walmart. Walmart Corporation has a strategic succession plan, which systematically looks at developing their employees through various programs such as mentoring, internships, global leadership, women's leadership, leadership and international academies, and programs for high potential employees. Walmart uses a very aggressive, systematic, and strategic approach to ensuring that the company is able to manage the talent of leaders at all levels within the corporation (Walmart 2014).

Regardless of what type of approach a corporation, government agency, or non-profit organization selects as a model, what is of greater importance is having a framework in place that originates at the strategic level of the organization. The process of putting the succession plan in writing is the first step towards successful succession planning within an organization.

### Senior Leadership Involvement

It is imperative that senior leadership within an organization be involved in the succession planning process. If senior leadership is not involved and vested in the process, it is unlikely that leaders at lower levels will be supportive. Consequently, it is unlikely that effective communication of the process and plan will occur within an organization.

P&G offers an admirable example of senior leader involvement in an organization's leadership development plan. Some of P&G's most senior executives are deeply involved in the development of future leaders. The leaders' involvement begins on college campuses where they are actively involved in the recruiting process on behalf of the company. Further, these leaders actively engage lower level managers by personally teaching in executive development programs. Additionally, these executives assist in developing junior managers by providing mentoring and coaching with the intent of developing the skills necessary to succeed in the corporate world (P&G 2014).

Walmart Corporation offers another outstanding example of senior leader involvement in an organizations' leadership development plan. Walmart's Business Leader Development Series 2.0 is one facet of Walmart's programs for high-potential leaders. In this series, leaders come together with the intent of broadening their knowledge across the various business lines. During this process, selected leaders network with one another and share knowledge and best practices. A hallmark of this series is that senior executives from the corporation act as session facilitators, which also includes participation from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). During the 2013 calendar year, over fifty senior executives were involved in the program, which demonstrates a



serious commitment to leadership on the part of executives within the corporation (Walmart 2014).

Yet another example of senior leader involvement in the organizations leadership development plan is IBM's General Management Leadership Development Program, which is offered to promising masters of business administration (MBA) graduates. Among the many features of this program is the chance to receive mentoring from a key senior executive within the company's performance team, which is comprised of senior executives that focus on the company's performance (IMB 2015b). It is important to recognize that in 2011, *Fortune Magazine* named IBM the number one corporation in leadership (Murphy 2011).

Organizations must carefully consider the needs of the agency when determining the involvement of senior leadership in the succession planning process. While the approach may be different for each institution, involvement of senior executives is critical. Without their support and direct involvement, it unlikely that the program will remain effective, viable, and supported by leaders at lower levels within the organization.

### Identification and Selection

The literature review revealed that it was critical for organizations to identify the right people to provide for future needs of the agency. The right person is one who has the aptitude to fill specific vacancies within the organization as they arise, and someone who is dedicated to their own development. Key indicators of this would be individuals who have pursued advanced degrees in fields relative to the position, individuals employed in agencies who have sought positions that broadened their understanding of the organization, and, finally, individuals who have volunteered for or accepted

broadening assignments or stretch assignments with the intent of going outside their comfort zones.

P&G provides an excellent example of identifying the right individuals for future leadership within an organization. P&G begins developing leaders for senior executive positions once individuals reach mid-level management. The company carefully selects individuals for assignment with the intent of providing broadening opportunities. These broadening opportunities will allow them to gain experience, which will groom them for future positions of increased responsibility within the company (P&G 2014).

IBM offers another excellent illustration of identifying the right individuals for future leadership opportunities within the organization. Consideration for acceptance into IBM's General Management Leadership Development Program is given to those individuals who have recently earned an MBA or for those enrolled and actively pursuing a degree. In addition, while there are many other criteria which are taken into account, IBM also takes into consideration individuals who have at least four years of experience, prior management experience, international experience, and fluency in a language other than English (IBM 2015a). Therefore, this demonstrates that some of the major considerations that IBM takes into account are the education level, work experience, leadership potential, and a global view of the world that the potential candidate has to offer.

Regardless of the method of identification and selection, it is imperative to find the right individuals to fill future vacancies within the agency. Agencies should carefully look for individuals pursuing or holding advanced degrees, and those who are willing to accept broadening assignments within their organization in order to develop the requisite

skills in which to lead the organization. Organizational success is not guaranteed by simply identifying the right individuals, however, it does guarantee that the agency is taking steps in the right direction.

### The Right Opportunities

Another key finding of this research project was the need to provide individuals with the right experiences, assignments, and opportunities. Governments, non-profits, and corporate entities could educate their leaders using an exemplary leadership curriculum; however, without requisite real-world experience, broadening assignments, and opportunities it will amount to nothing more than theory. Education provides an excellent foundation for most of life's challenges; however, there is no substitute for challenging experiences and broadening assignments.

Walmart Corporation provides another excellent illustration of providing the right opportunities to individuals within an organization. Walmart's selects leaders identified as highly talented to attend their Leadership Academy. These individuals are not only individuals previously identified as potential corporate candidates, but also individuals from various levels within their management structure. This academy provides these individuals developmental opportunities in various business lines, exposes them to executives within the corporation, offers instructional opportunities, the experience and exposure to projects of various types. Finally, it provides them with a new assignment upon completion of the program (Walmart 2014).

Another illustration of providing the right developmental opportunities to individuals within an organization is the corporation Accenture. Accenture provides high-potential senior managers an opportunity to take part in a lengthy nine-month program.

The program is designed around three areas the company has identified as crucial to their success: the ability to create value, develop employees, and manage a business that will earn profits for the company. During the program, the participants attend workshops focused on these three critical areas. In addition, they have the opportunity to work on real world problems that the company must overcome (Accenture 2008).

Education is critical to meet many challenges within organizations. However, of equal importance is the education that employees receive when they are engaged in real world situations. Therefore, it is imperative that agencies provide individuals broadening assignments and opportunities that will challenge them to think critically about the organization of which they are a part. By providing these opportunities, agencies will develop leaders capable of meeting future challenges within the organization.

### Be Proactive

Another key finding was the need for an organization to be proactive. Organizations should not wait until it is too late and positions are vacant or near vacant. Succession planning is something that takes time because of the human element involved. There are many unpredictable variables when dealing with the human element; people die unexpectedly, become chronically ill, and are unable to continue employment, and individuals take new positions at other companies. The time to initiate succession planning is when there is no critical need to fill the position.

The corporation Accenture provides a good illustration of this proactive approach to succession planning. Accenture has taken a holistic approach to succession planning. The corporation has identified approximately 400 critical positions within the organization, which they have determined to be vital to the success of the organization.

The company then targets these individuals and offers opportunities for development through methods such as education, training, and variations in assignments and locations (Accenture 2008).

Another illustration of a proactive approach to succession planning comes from the Fortune 500 Company ExxonMobil. ExxonMobil begins the process of succession planning by identifying future leaders early in their career and developing leaders from within the company. For those individuals identified, the company provides them with broadening assignments with gradually intensifying levels of responsibility and send them through a formal leadership development program. The leadership development program focuses on three areas: basic business principles, the personal attributes of leaders, and leadership activities that focus upon performance in order to achieve results. For example, the Vice President of Geoscience at ExxonMobil Production Company started as a summer intern. The president of one of their research companies started as a drilling engineer and has since completed many challenging assignments over the course of her career (ExxonMobil 2015).

Amazon offers another example of a company that is proactive in building a future bench of leaders. Amazon has a Global MBA Program that places individuals with an MBA or master's level equivalent degree in a position of significant responsibility. The company offers five different tracks in retail management, operations management, financial analysis, human resources leadership, and infrastructure management. Each of these programs span three years and focus on one of the key areas previously described. The organization proactively identifies and recruits individuals with an MBA or master's level equivalent degree and places them in positions of increasing responsibility over the

course of the program. Upon completion, individuals receive promotions and assume responsibility for operations in positions such as general manager, operations manager, and area manager (Amazon.jobs 2015).

Being proactive is a critical element of succession planning. Development is something that takes considerable time. Individuals must have opportunities to become educated and develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities in order to successfully meet the needs of the agency. Failing to build a bench of qualified individuals to fill critical positions could result in an organization's failure to meet their stated mission.

However, corporations do not always get it right as illustrated in the 2010 article titled "The 2010 Survey on CEO Succession Planning" written by David F. Larker and Stephen A. Miles for Heidrick and Struggles and Rock Center for Corporate Governance at Stanford University. Larker and Miles found that over half of all U.S. companies have not identified a successor to their current CEO in the event an immediate replacement was needed. The authors noted that corporate boards do not spend adequate time on this process. In addition, the authors found that while most everyone agrees that a CEO's replacement should be identified and pre-positioned to take over should a replacement be needed, only slightly over half of all companies have taken such the steps necessary to prepare individuals to do so. Further, the authors found that the majority of companies responding only spend two hours on succession planning on average in a given year and the committees responsible for this task only spend an additional two hours per year on the task of succession planning. The study revealed that only half of all responding companies have a written description of the skills that the CEO of their company should

possess. Furthermore, once a new CEO had been identified, only half of all responding companies provide transition assistance to the new CEO (Larcker and Miles 2010, 203).

### Importance of Lifelong Learning

Individuals and organizations should never ignore the value and importance of lifelong learning. Any organization that chooses to, does so at its own peril. Lifelong learning prevents organizations and individuals from becoming stagnant and provides individuals with new ideas, new ways of doing things, and fresh perspectives on issues, which are important to the organization.

One of the oldest organizations in America, the U.S. Army, recognizes the value of lifelong learning. The organization instills in their leaders the importance of being lifelong learners and requires that leaders pursue this type of learning as part of their overall development plan (HQDA 2013a, 1-6). In fact, the Army contends, “To master the profession at every level, a leader must make a full commitment to lifelong learning” and cites this as the method in which leaders develop themselves as well as through broadening assignments (HQDA 2012, 7-1). There are several considerations the Army takes into account regarding the lifelong learning process. For soldiers, the process is an intentional process that continues through a soldier’s career. The learning process is founded on the collective knowledge, skills, and abilities that individuals acquire through various assignments, educational experiences, and training opportunities. In addition, the Army recognizes individual self-development as a key component of the lifelong learning process (HQDA 2013b1, 23). In addition, in a recently released article, OPM also noted the importance of lifelong learning in the high-speed culture of which everyone is a part (OPM 2015).

Another illustration of an organization which values lifelong learning is the Fortune 500 Company Phillips 66. One of the corporation's goals is to build a learning culture. Opportunities are provided through various work assignments; training programs, and networking opportunities. The company stresses the importance of continuous learning and then encourages employees to apply that learning in the workplace (Phillips 66 2015).

Prior to implementing any succession plan within a federal government agency, it is imperative that agencies give due consideration to MSP and PPP. There were numerous examples in the preceding pages, outlining best practices in the corporate world. However, before applying these or other practices, agency officials and leaders must familiarize themselves with these principles to ensure compliance with U.S.C. As previously summarized, Title 5 U.S.C. statute 2301 outlines nine MSPs that agencies must follow in the practice of managing the executive branch workforce. Therefore, leadership should therefore review these nine principles prior to developing or implementing any succession plan. In addition, it is vitally important to have an understanding of the twelve PPPs outlined in Title 5 U.S.C. statute 2302, prior to implementing any training program or selecting individuals for training or educational opportunities.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, succession planning is critical to organizational success and there are several considerations that must be taken into account when developing and implementing an effective succession plan. These include having a plan originating at the strategic level of the organization; the involvement of senior leadership; identification



and selection of the right individuals, providing the right experiences, assignments, and opportunities; being proactive; and finally, creating an organization that focuses on lifelong learning. Doing all of these things will not necessarily guarantee an organization success; however, by not accomplishing these things, an organization assumes a significant amount of unavoidable risk.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, recommendations and conclusions regarding the steps the DVA should take to ensure effective succession planning will be explored. In addition, this chapter will offer recommendations for further research and inquiry regarding this subject.

It is imperative that before beginning any succession plan or restructuring a plan within an agency, that the responsible individual within the agency consult with General Council and have them review the plan. Taking this step will ensure the program does not violate the MSPs. Failure to do so could place the organization in jeopardy, concerning the laws related to anti-discrimination and retaliation in the workplace. This could lead to lawsuits, complaints of discrimination, damage to the morale of the organization, grievances, and awards from agency funds that reduces the overall effectiveness of the organization. Furthermore, when implementing any program, it is good practice to involve the agency's labor partners and establish a communications strategy to inform the individuals within the organization.

As outlined in chapter 1, the DVA has made immense improvements to transform the business lines to provide timely and quality service to our nation's Veterans. However, the department continues to face significant challenges given the size and complexity of the workload, the effect of recent wars, and, the increased demand on healthcare services and claims processing. Meeting these challenges will require executives capable of transforming the agency and the way it conducts business within the organization. With the aim of transforming the agency, the DVA must be able to

cultivate leaders with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of senior executives. Developing these leaders will assist in meeting the agency's objective of serving the Veterans of our great nation.

The department, in order to ensure effective succession planning, must establish an integrated and comprehensive leadership development program within the agency. A leadership development program might initially appear fiscally cost prohibitive to an organization and result in a critical loss of duty time. However, the cost of failing to make leadership development a priority within an organization can be far more costly when measured against factors such as losses in timeliness, effectiveness, costs of grievances and lawsuits, as well as intangible costs such as negative public opinion.

In order to promote effective succession planning within the department, the DVA should establish a One VA Leadership Development Academy within the agency, which serves the needs of the NCA, VBA, and VHA rather than having separate academies or educational programs within the organization. This will promote intra-agency networking and provide leaders with exposure to various perspectives, people, and practices that will assist in developing leaders with a broad view of the organization. Furthermore, it will establish consistency in the leadership ranks and potentially promote greater leadership mobility throughout the department. Individuals would attend a basic leadership development program with employees from all DVA administrations. Once individuals complete this basic leadership development program, they would then attend any specialized leadership education or training as required by the specific administrations that employ them. Once individuals receive promotions to division level management, they should be required to attend an advanced leadership development program with

individuals from all DVA administrations. Following the advanced leadership development program, participants would then attend any specialized leadership education or training as required by the specific administrations that employ them as part of a phase II education and training process.

The second recommendation is that the agency redesign its initial professional leadership development curriculum, founded upon the fundamental competencies and six ECQs as defined by OPM. First, the agency should require that all new supervisors regardless of previous educational attainment attend a leadership pre-requisite education course. Management should take into consideration whether the new supervisor successfully completed this course as one of the factors in determining whether to retain the individual in a leadership position beyond the one-year mandatory probation period required for all new supervisors. This course should consist of blocks of instruction in the following areas: fundamental competencies of interpersonal skills, written and oral communication, ethics and public service, and finally, an introduction to the process or concept of lifelong learning.

The DVA is in the business of caring for our nation's Veterans and that fact should drive our daily actions. While many employees, such as those in the VBA, do not interact with Veterans on a daily basis, many others interact with numerous Veterans each day, such as those employees serving in the DVA hospitals, clinics, and cemeteries. However, for those that do not, there are a number of opportunities to interact with DVA partners and other stakeholders, such as service organizations and congressional liaisons. Given the numerous interactions with Veterans, stakeholders, and internal customers, it is imperative that individuals possess excellent interpersonal skills. The accumulation of

daily encounters is what shapes the image of the organization more than anything else does. Therefore, it does not matter how good the public relations team, is if each employee that engages with a Veteran or stakeholder does not possess effective interpersonal skills, the agency suffers. If effective interpersonal skills are lacking, poor individual interactions might tarnish the organization where only glimmers of the good it accomplishes remains. Therefore, it is critical to the mission and success of the agency to teach new leaders at all levels appropriate interpersonal skills. Armed with this knowledge, leaders at all levels will have the ability to impress upon their subordinates the need to treat everyone with dignity and respect, thereby creating a culture that the nation's Veterans, stakeholders, and employees deserve. Thus, it is imperative that all new leaders are educated and encouraged to develop appropriate interpersonal skills.

The DVA produces thousands of documents each day for public consumption, and the DVA leadership interacts with individuals external to the organization each day through routine outreach programs. Therefore, it is imperative that leaders and managers within the department possess excellent oral and written communication skills in order to communicate effectively with DVA constituencies. Skills in effective communication are not something that can be taught overnight, but rather must be cultivated over time. Thus, it is critical that all new leaders are educated in and provided opportunities to develop effective oral and written communication skills. This effort should begin with a leadership pre-requisite education course and as the leader progresses within the organization, further education and development opportunities must be built into the curriculum and work routine.

In August 2014, the Compliance Division of the United States Office of Government Ethics conducted an Ethics Program Review of the DVA. The report highlighted that in comparison to other federal agencies, the DVA had the lowest number of dedicated ethics staff per employee than any other cabinet level agency. The major recommendation stemming from that report was the department should conduct a review of the staffing level and increase the number of ethics personnel. The panel suggested that the agency assign this as an additional duty to selected employees throughout the organization. However, this report did not find the DVA to be an unethical organization that failed to train employees. In fact, the report showed that the DVA Chief of Staff in 2013 mandated that all employees, whether required by regulation or not, receive annual ethics training. As a result, records show that a minimum of 88 percent of all DVA employees received ethics training in the period from June 2013 to June 2014. During this review, Secretary Robert A. McDonald expressed the need for a strong, sustainable ethical climate driven by the department's managers and indoctrinated into all operations (U.S. Office of Government Ethics 2014).

Many individuals who enter public service have a strong desire to help others and rely on a government salary to meet the basic needs of life. This is true in both in the civilian sector of the government and in the military. While it would be the hope and desire of the general public that all employees within the government seek employment out of a purely altruistic desire to perform public service, that simply is not the reality in most cases. Conversely, it is also important to realize that most individuals do not seek employment for purely selfish reasons. The fact is that the truth, as with most things, lies somewhere in the middle. Public employees come from all segments of our society and

bring varying sets of values, which may be quite different from those of the organization. Furthermore, the workplace is often fraught with ethical dilemmas, which can threaten our adherence to our espoused ethical ideologies. Each individual will encounter situations in life that will challenge individual and organizational ethics. Therefore, one needs to have a self-awareness of their individual and organizational ethics, beliefs, and values. Thus, the organization's values must be inculcated to all employees especially those in leadership positions.

Focusing on leadership education in the fundamental competencies of ethics and public service will build the base for a strong ethical climate within the department. Further, this will assist the department in achieving Secretary McDonald's goal of indoctrinating DVA ethics throughout the organization. Therefore, the department, as part of a professional leadership development curriculum, should design a comprehensive ethics course that will provide a basis for building future and advanced courses in ethics.

The final consideration regarding fundamental competencies is the concept of lifelong learning. Critical to any successful succession planning process is the concept of lifelong learning. Its importance has been demonstrated throughout this project. It is imperative that any basic leadership curriculum stress the importance of this topic at entry into a leadership position. Exposure to this concept is critical to the new leader, and all leaders should be aware of the importance of the concept, as well as the avenues for achieving this development. Individuals must be made aware of the role that formal education, training, informal education, broadening experiences, and self-study play in building leadership capacity.

Once supervisors have completed the initial education and training based on the OPM fundamental competencies, the design of all subsequent education and training should revolve around the ECQs outlined by OPM. In other words, the agency should consider the end state in the design of the curriculum.

The development of competencies as outlined by OPM is cultivated over the course of a career and through various means. Individuals master these competencies in the classroom, during on the job training, through various assignments, and by trial and error. Therefore, it is imperative that the agency design a comprehensive education and training plan, centered on the ECQs as outlined by OPM. In doing so, the organization will be in the position to develop a wide cohort of well-qualified leaders from which to choose when vacancies occur within the executive ranks. Approaching the development of the ECQs in a methodical and progressive manner will develop the leaders who will one day serve as executives within the agency. Furthermore, this approach will strengthen the organizational leadership structure as a whole by developing competent, agile, and adaptive leaders.

A strong foundation based on the fundamental competencies and ECQs is critical to the success of the organization. It is imperative that the organization provide every employee in a leadership position with a strong foundation. Failure to provide this has the potential to doom any succession plan from the start. Conversely, providing a strong leadership foundation will set an organization on the road to success and will build a stronger bench of leaders from which to derive future SES candidates.

Another recommendation concluded from this study is that the agency must ensure that individuals in the grades of GS-13 through GS-15 be provided the right



opportunities. These must be provided with the aim of developing leaders capable of filling future voids in the SES ranks. Currently, outside of specific programs, there is no general mobility requirement for leaders who accept positions at the GS-13 and GS-15 pay grades. Based on the research conducted during the course of this project, this is in direct opposition to what should occur. All the evidence demonstrates that the combination of experiences, assignments, and opportunities are an integral part of leader development. The fact is that in order to develop future executives, the DVA needs leaders who are willing to accept new assignments, opportunities, and experiences that may not make them comfortable.

The DVA faces many challenges as an organization due to heavy workload demands and will continue to face significant challenges in the years ahead. There is a critical need for leaders who are agile, adaptive, and willing to risk personal discomfort, inconvenience, and even the prospect of failure to advance the needs of the agency. Currently, many leaders within the DVA do not move fluidly within the various business lines of the department and many do not even move fluidly within their own business lines. Given there is no requirement to do so, many individuals continue to occupy the same position year after year and never seek or experience new challenges or broadening opportunities. This results in stagnation at the operational level of the organization and fails to build a pool of individuals capable of assuming executive responsibilities within the agency. The citizens of the United States have the expectation that all military members from a private without a chevron, to a general officer with four stars, make themselves available for worldwide deployment. Therefore, it is not beyond reasonable expectations that individuals occupying positions equivalent to military field grade

officers should make themselves available for nationwide assignment. Therefore, it is the recommendation that all employees that apply for and accept supervisory positions within the department be required to sign mobility agreements and make themselves available for nationwide assignment in any of the three business lines within the department. This is a bold recommendation, which will certainly require a cultural shift within the organization and meet stiff resistance; however, it is necessary in order to ensure accomplishment of the mission.

The evidence demonstrates that it is imperative that organizations provide their leaders with the right experiences, assignments, and opportunities. The DVA must take bold and unprecedented steps to ensure that leaders hired in management positions in the GS-13 to GS-15 ranks have a willingness to commit to the organization's success by accepting nationwide assignment.

The fourth recommendation involves change within the organization. As previously established, the department has worked hard to transform people, processes, and technology in recent years; however, much work remains. This will require individuals who are capable of leading change and know the processes and methods of facilitating change within an organization. Managers at all levels need to be comfortable with change; however, this is not a process that can begin once someone reaches the SES level. This education must be started early in an individual's career so that by the time they reach the executive level, they have the requisite experience in organizational change. Therefore, the department should implement a series of change management classes, which should be taught at various levels of leadership as individuals move progressively through the ranks within the organization. Having leaders who are skilled

in change management will assist in managing the inevitable change that will occur in the future.

In conclusion, with the intention of promoting effective succession planning within the DVA, department leadership should provide opportunities to up and coming leaders. First, the department should establish an integrated and comprehensive leadership development program within the agency, which encompasses all business lines. Second, the agency should must redesign and expand professional leadership development curriculum, centered on the fundamental competencies and six ECQs as defined by OPM. Third, the agency must provide these leaders with the right experiences, assignments, and opportunities. Finally, due to the significant challenges faced by the department, the agency should implement a series of change management classes for individuals as they progress through the leadership ranks within the department. Following these four recommendations will provide the framework for a leadership developmental model that will provide the right opportunities to individuals to allow effective succession planning to take place within the DVA. The consequence of failing to effectively plan could result in serious consequences, such as leaders who are unprepared to lead at the executive level, loss of organizational effectiveness, and delays in effective benefits, healthcare, and burial services to the Veterans we are charged with serving.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

1. Comprehensive research into the succession plans, best practices and failures of the top twenty-five Fortune 500 companies
2. Strategic planning at the state and local level

3. The key components of a strategic succession plan
4. Reasons why individuals enter public service

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